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Authority through Activism

Islamophobia, Social Justice, and Black Lives Matter

> In El Hajj Malik's [Malcolm X] letter from Hajj to his followers, he said in part, "There were tens of thousands of pilgrims from all over the world. They were of all colors from blue-eyed blondes to the Black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white." This still resonates. And for sisters that have felt in any way lesser than, at Hajj you will be rewarded to see that you are the same as any believer. You are worthy, dear sister to make this journey. And part of the journey, I think particularly for women, is to know your self-worth.
> —Hajjah Krishna Nunnally Najieb, from her February 2020 khutbah, "The Transformative Power of Hajj"

In her khutbah on the Hajj and its powerful effect on her as a Black Muslim woman, Krishna Najieb invoked the legacy of Malcolm X, who had performed this rite in 1964, one year before his assassination. Hajj is the annual pilgrimage to Mecca that is incumbent upon all Muslims to complete once in their lifetime if it is physically and financially feasible. In his letters and autobiography, Malcolm X described how worshiping alongside Muslims of different races and ethnicities had transformed him, and made him amenable to working toward Black liberation alongside white allies and the mainstream civil rights movement in the US.[1] Najieb connected Malcolm's experiences to her own, stating that participating in this ritual was likewise transformative and made her feel equal to her fellow Muslim pilgrims. The Hajj strengthened Najieb's personal relationship with God and validated her self-worth as a Muslim woman.

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When Najieb realized that her Hajj journey coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of Malcolm's own, she felt further validated, as if God had been sending her signs her whole life. She had converted to Islam in her fifties but had been familiar with Malcolm X's account of the Hajj since she was a teenager. "I didn't realize until midway through our pilgrimage that it was the fiftieth anniversary of the Hajj journey for El Hajj Malik," she stated. "Looking back I now feel like Allah was leaving signs for me to get on the path even at the age of seventeen."[2] Being able to connect Malcolm X's Hajj experience with her own imbued an increased significance to her identity as a Black Muslim woman. To Najieb, it was a sign from God that she, as a Black woman, was just as worthy as any other Muslim believer. Throughout her khutbah, she reflected on Hajj as a process through which Muslim women, particularly Black women, could understand and affirm their own worth in Islam.

Through such reflections on her racial-religious identity, Najieb and other Black khateebahs have introduced prominent Black Muslim figures like Malcolm X, W. D. Mohammed, and Elijah Muhammad into the WMA's lexicon. These famous figures' entry into the WMA's worldview plays a role in merging the history of Black Islam in the US with the larger story of Islam in America, especially for non-Black congregants who are unaware of this history. Beyond correcting the erasure of Black Muslims from narratives of American Islam through some of its khutbahs, the WMA also creates opportunities for congregants to cultivate a shared moral consciousness across racial identity by committing to social justice activism, countering Islamophobia, and confronting anti-Black racism within Muslim communities.

Islamophobia, or anti-Muslim racism, has been a central concern for the WMA since its inception, before the start of Donald Trump's explicitly Islamophobic and xenophobic presidency in 2017. A number of WMA khateebahs have utilized scripture to encourage Muslims to proactively address Islamophobia through community building, civic engagement, or by creating spaces to safeguard and cultivate an American Muslim identity. Moreover, many WMA khutbahs have showcased how the normalization of white supremacy in the US public profoundly shapes how American Muslims see themselves and their communities as racialized others. This chapter investigates the way that American Muslims' status as social and political outsiders to the white mainstream

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informs how they engage sacred Islamic sources through the lens of social justice. It also analyzes how the WMA enables congregants to draw connections between multiple forms of oppression that afflict Black and non-Black Muslims alike, setting the stage for them to build interracial solidarity with each other.

The WMA facilitates interracial solidarity among congregants on multiple levels. On a discursive level, some khateebahs have addressed the shared histories of Black and non-Black Muslims in America in their khutbahs on Islamophobia. Others have put Islamic scriptures in conversation with specific American social issues like anti-Black racism, demonstrating how they affect Muslims across racial and ethnic identities. On the level of community, the WMA treats the mosque as a venue to confront anti-Black racism through its programming. WMA leaders hosted a discussion series on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2016 for congregants to participate in dialogue with each other, and in 2020, hosted a virtual conversation on the Hajj, women, and race. The results of such programming do not reflect a linear trajectory of success in solidarity building, based on the many challenges of racial justice work. Congregants ultimately have mixed feelings about the extent to which they experience interracial understanding and solidarity at the WMA. Nevertheless, to these same congregants, the WMA's engagement with social justice issues like structural racism, environmental degradation, and gender discrimination bolsters its religious authority because it renders Islamic scriptures relevant to current events and to their political values and concerns. By exploring how these issues motivate WMA khateebahs to put Islamic scriptures in conversation with social justice causes, we can see how they cultivate authority on the basis of their activism.

A Multiracial Congregation

> I didn't have that problem [of marginalization] in my mosque. I didn't have anybody telling me what I could and could not do . . . [but] I kind of know of the trials and tribulations of my immigrant sisters. They've got it a little bit more rough than we [African American Muslim women] do. We are kind of in your face and loud. We are not taking that

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> stuff. You all [South Asian women] got to get there. The idea of a mosque being started by a woman—I could understand the reasoning. Whether I had issues at my mosque or not, we had no choice but to support our sister [Maznavi]. . . . I'm old. She is such a youngster, just the bravery, it took some guts to do something like that. I will support her till the day I die and I will fight for it [the WMA] till the day I die.[3]
> —Tina, African American, in her sixties

As a multiracial community, the WMA serves as a space in which African American, immigrant (including Black), Latinx, and white Muslims can cultivate camaraderie across their experiences and construct a shared identity. As a racially diverse congregation, the WMA is a useful site to explore the relationships between African American Muslims and their "immigrant" and white counterparts. Here I use "immigrant," as my subjects do, to broadly signify the ethnic backgrounds of first-, second-, and subsequent-generation Americans. As Islamic studies scholars like Jamillah Karim and Sherman Jackson show, African American and immigrant Muslims have a mutually conflicting relationship with American whiteness.[4] Despite the shared historical consciousness of African Americans and immigrant Muslims through their brutal experiences of subjugation through American slavery and European colonization, Jackson argues, immigrant Muslims are complicit in anti-Black racism. He states that, in fact, many immigrant and Black Muslim communities do not identify with each other.[5] Indeed, as cultural anthropologist Zain Abdullah demonstrates, even Black African immigrant Muslims dissociate themselves from African American Muslims since they have "internalized stereotypes depicting African Americans as criminals or people caught in a cycle of destructive behavior."[6] In other words, even as they face anti-Black racism, African Muslims along with South Asian and other immigrant Muslims lean into the trope of the "model minority" in which they attribute their upward economic mobility in the US to their hard work and family values, overlooking the role of structural racism that prevents African Americans from making similar gains.

Karim also observes that African American Muslim women often view immigrant Muslim women as unduly subjugated by their men, a sentiment that Tina echoes above. Tina characterizes South Asian

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women in general as not standing up for themselves against their men to the extent that African American women do. Her eagerness to embrace Maznavi and the WMA (and to be interviewed for this book) was grounded in her desire to support a younger generation of South Asian women who, in her view, were making important strides in asserting their voices as Muslim women—whether through creating a women's mosque or, in my case, writing about it. Tina's anecdotal observations about African American and immigrant women in mosques conform to the available data on gendered experiences in mosques. While Muslim women's experiences across US mosques are multiple and varied, according to a 2011 study, African American mosques—particularly W. D. Mohammed's communities that came out of the legacy of the NOI[7]—and Shi'i mosques tended to be more "woman-friendly" in comparison to immigrant Sunni mosques. These mosques had more adequate women's prayer spaces and did not use physical partitions to separate women and men.[8]

Consistent with the trends reported in that 2011 study, African American women at the WMA, like Tina, attested to inclusive experiences at their own mosques. In fact, many African American women at the WMA were involved in leadership roles at their home mosques.[9] For example, Ibtihal, an African American in her late thirties, explained that her mosque community in Pasadena operated as one big family. While men exclusively led ritual prayer at her mosque, women were on the executive board. Ibtihal further explained that, though it was "by no means perfect" in terms of gender equality, she felt that her mosque included women's voices in leadership decisions to a great extent, especially in comparison to other communities.[10]

Zahara and Celeste, both African American and in their sixties, similarly characterized their respective African American home mosques as having better conditions for women than those run by Arab and South Asian leaders. Zahara described an incident from over a decade ago, when a male member of her African American congregation erected a partition to separate the women and men's prayer spaces. Zahara removed the partition, stating that it was simply not a viable option for her. He did not make a second attempt.[11] Black Muslim women like Zahara, and Tina above, characterize themselves as assertive members of their congregations. These women attributed their assertiveness, in part,

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to their experiences of African American Muslim congregations being structured as families, which to them made it more likely that women's voices would be heard and respected.

For this reason, African American congregants like Celeste and Kenyatta were somewhat hesitant to get on board with the WMA in its earliest stages. They were skeptical about whether an all-women's mosque constituted progress or was worthwhile at all. They were accustomed to worshiping in the same community as their male kin and felt that, if they were to give a khutbah, they would want to be heard by the men in their communities. As such, they were not initially sure if the WMA as a woman-only mosque was the right fit for them. Ultimately, however, among current congregants, those who initially harbored certain reservations about the WMA as a woman-only space came to appreciate it for the unique community it had become, and they embraced their own roles as mentors and models for younger members.

The majority of the older African American women in this study shared Tina's sentiment of supporting the WMA in solidarity. Many of them operated from a protective impulse to nurture and guide younger American Muslims of immigrant heritage who were marginalized in their own home mosques, or those who were generally without a spiritual community. Women like Tina support the WMA despite the fact that they do not feel similarly marginalized in their own mosques. These elder African American Muslim women are not only willing to give their support to the WMA and their "immigrant sisters," as Tina put it, but are also committed to constructing a shared religious community with them. I use "Black" and "African American" interchangeably in referring to my interlocutors, as they used both terms to describe themselves. It is worth noting that all of the Black WMA members in this study are African American; the women with whom I spoke did not include Black Muslims from immigrant backgrounds.[12] This does not mean that there are *no* Black immigrant women in the community, but there are a number of reasons we might consider when thinking about why African Americans might be more likely to gravitate toward the WMA.

As mentioned earlier, the dynamic between Black immigrant and African American Muslims can be antagonistic. Aware of how racial hierarchies operate in the US, Black immigrants often do not want to be associated with African Americans or Blackness and prefer to identify

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with their national identities.[13] Likewise, African American Muslims, particularly groups influenced by reform movements in the Middle East, can also be unwelcoming toward African immigrant Muslims, criticizing their dress and religious customs as not properly Islamic.[14] Beyond the anti-Black sentiment behind both of these impulses, there may also be general anxiety among Black immigrant Muslims about discussing politics or race in the mosque, based on the precarity of their own status as Americans. Particularly if they are undocumented, Black immigrant Muslims may not feel safe in a mosque with activist commitments, and may not want to draw additional attention to themselves as political agitators, particularly when US mosques are known to be closely surveilled by law enforcement. In other cases, some African immigrant Muslim communities forge ties with federal agencies and cooperate in counterterror efforts by policing their communities for signs of radicalization.[15] Given the long history of tension between NOI mosques and the FBI,[16] African American mosques affiliated with the NOI or W. D. Mohammed's communities are generally less trusting of law enforcement, and oriented toward political organizing. Despite Mohammed's shift away from the NOI's Black separatism, he remained committed to developing mosques as centers for Black autonomy and community building—as opposed to tools for assimilation and acceptance into white mainstream American society. In this way, these African American mosques resemble how the institution of the Black church has served African American Protestant communities.[17]

Because of the fear of surveillance, non-Black immigrant Muslims, and mosques with immigrant Muslim leadership, may be similarly hesitant to address social justice concerns that might render them politically "threatening" to white America.[18] Conflicting relationships between different US Muslim communities and law enforcement also pose substantial barriers to interracial solidarity, especially when immigrant mosques cultivate partnerships with local police departments at the expense of solidarity with Black Muslims, who are victims of rampant police brutality.[19] These dynamics give us a sense of some of the broader challenges to Muslims' coming together and building community across racial and ethnic identity. It also helps us to understand the type of American Muslim who might be more likely to be attracted to the WMA's social justice activism: African Americans whose Islam already appeals to ra-

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cial equality, and more broadly those Muslims who are eager to leverage their various privileges (racial, economic, citizenship status) to engage social issues that matter to them. For such Muslims, being a part of a multiracial congregation that utilizes the mosque as a site for social justice activism is particularly appealing. The next section explores how the WMA navigates the idea of a shared community across racial identity by spotlighting a khutbah that links the histories of African American and immigrant Muslims. This khutbah provides a basis to think about how American Muslims—both Black and non-Black—are racialized and politicized as the "other," and how their intersecting marginalization could serve as a framework for solidarity.

A Shared History: Racializing Muslims

> I struggled [deciding] between talking about asserting our civil rights, pushing back against racial profiling and the national security framework, police killings of African American civilians, FBI targeting of Muslims. . . . I would argue that it [Islamophobia] is the root of many of our challenges today. They might not be able to drone-bomb Yemen or Somalia if we weren't dehumanized as a community. We might have more allies in public office if they weren't afraid to associate with our community. . . . Last year I, as a Muslim woman of color, chose to question Memorial Day and the way we celebrate war in this country and the holy grail that is the military industrial complex. And for more than a week, I was profiled by Fox News, I had hate mail sent to my work. . . . I could not pick up my phone for fear of death threats and silencing, so much so that it not only made me afraid, it made the people around me afraid. Every time I questioned war . . . I must consider: am I permitted to do this as a Muslim woman of color?[20]
>
> —Zahra Billoo, from her July 2015 khutbah, "Combatting Islamophobia"

Addressing Islamophobia in mainstream American culture has figured prominently in the broader agenda of the WMA. As a nonprofit

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organization, the WMA does not endorse any particular politicians or propositions, though the *Khateebah Guidebook* encourages khateebahs to promote voting and civic engagement.[21] Accordingly, over the course of the WMA's tenure, khateebahs have urged congregants to engage in civic activities, build community, and participate in local governance, often framing these actions as a means to resist Islamophobia. In her khutbah, Billoo, a labor-rights advocacy lawyer who is the executive director of CAIR (the Council on American-Islamic Relations) in the Bay Area, defined Islamophobia as "close-minded prejudice or bigotry against Islam and Muslims." Islamophobia, she asserted, was responsible for the US bombings in Yemen and Somalia, a dearth of Muslim allies in US politics, and her own experiences of public censure as a Pakistani American Muslim woman following her critiques of the military industrial complex.

In her khutbah, Billoo portrayed Islamophobia as a multifaceted phenomenon of anti-Muslim racism promulgated by various individual and collective actors, including the US state apparatus. Her treatment here is consistent with Edward Curtis's argument that Islamophobia in the US "is not exclusively the reflection of certain cultural and political interests" but also "the product of the state's legal and extra-legal attempts to control, discipline, and punish Muslim American individuals and organizations."[22] Billoo's experience of targeted abuse aligns with both of Curtis's categories; not only was she subjected to threats of violence by individuals whose political and cultural interests differed from her own, but she was also targeted by corporate media, which enables state Islamophobia. Since mass media shapes public opinion by disseminating narratives that justify government policies like the War on Terror, it plays a key role in structural Islamophobia.[23] As a result of being on the receiving end of multipronged Islamophobia, Billoo questioned whether as a Muslim woman of color she would ever be permitted to critique her own government without being cast as a "terrorist sympathizer."[24]

Billoo's public censure as a Muslim woman of color has a long history in the US and can be traced back to the legacy of state repression of African Americans. The media and the government have long engaged in the systematic production of Islamophobia to control and repress American Muslims. Since the 1930s and throughout the civil rights era, African American Muslims (and non-Muslims) in particular were

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racialized by the state as political others who posed an inherent threat to national security.[25] Religious studies scholar Sylvester Johnson demonstrates that this process of racialization occurred through systematic FBI surveillance, harassment, and violence toward African American organizations. Organizations such as the Black Panther Party, the Nation of Islam (NOI), and unarmed Black student activist groups across college campuses were brutally repressed by the US state.[26]

Furthermore, the FBI disseminated anti-Muslim propaganda in the media to influence perceptions of the NOI as inherently dangerous to mainstream white American society. These propaganda campaigns advanced the idea that the NOI was not an authentic religious organization but a "hate-based political movement merely masquerading as a religion."[27] FBI training manuals, while implicitly maintaining the superiority and moral innocence of white Americans, portrayed Black Muslims as primitive, violent, and irrational as opposed to the adherents of "real Islam," which they deemed "a thoroughly spiritual religion of peace and brotherhood."[28] Despite these FBI manuals' distinction between African American Islam and "real" Islam from the Middle East, Johnson demonstrates that by the 1960s immigrant Muslims had also been recast as enemies of the state.

American Muslims' political marginalization was further intensified in the post-9/11 era.[29] Johnson shows that the same rhetoric the FBI had deployed against Black Muslims and immigrant Muslims in the 1960s, depicting them as fanatics prone to violence, was again applied to Muslims of immigrant background as they were "vilified as enemies of the West" immediately following 9/11.[30] The similarities between the racialization processes to which Black and non-Black American Muslims have been subjected indicates the continuity of the US national security paradigm across decades and how it renders Islam as intrinsically other than American.[31] Curtis argues that the US state's treatment of immigrant brown Muslims in the post-9/11 context and its treatment of Black African American Muslims pre-9/11 both reveal the systematic suppression of any Muslims who critique the US state.[32] Immigrant American Muslim women like Billoo have lived that experience and acknowledge the continuities of the national security paradigm in the US. For example, Billoo listed civil rights, racial profiling, national security, police killings of African American civilians, and FBI targeting of Muslims as elements that all relate to the

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pervasive structures of Islamophobia. In this way, her khutbah merged the narratives of Black and non-Black American Muslims rather than treating them as separate groups without a shared history.

Billoo's implicit linkage of early twentieth-century African American Muslims in the Nation of Islam with post-1965 immigrant Muslim narratives is noteworthy because many American Muslim communities do not consider Black and brown American Muslim histories as continuous. This is both because of "immigrant" Muslim perceptions (and, as Curtis and Johnson both note, academic, mainstream media, and FBI perceptions) of the NOI as a "heterodox" and inauthentic manifestation of Islam, and because of the anti-Black racist attitudes that pervade US Muslim communities. Despite these perceptions, anti-Muslim hate in the US, whether against Black or immigrant Muslims, is indeed linked. As American studies scholar Sylvia Chan-Malik argues, Islam in America is a "racial-religious form," and racial stereotypes have been attached to Muslim identity based on various political, social, and economic circumstances. Chan-Malik suggests that anti-Muslim hate in the US be understood through the lenses of not only "orientalism and xenophobia but also through the historical legacies of and contemporary expressions of anti-blackness, misogyny, sexual violence, and the acknowledgment of the United States as an imperial settler colonial nation."[33] WMA khateebahs like Billoo frame their understandings of Islamophobia in precisely these historically layered ways. Billoo accounted for the xenophobic underpinnings of her own experiences of anti-Muslim harassment as she recounted multiple incidents of white Americans telling her to "go back to her own country."[34] At the same time, she also included the issue of police brutality against African Americans under the umbrella of Islamophobia, the central subject of her khutbah. Billoo also identified how her gendered identity as a visibly Muslim woman made her susceptible to particular forms of harassment and accusations that she was not authentically American, with xenophobia, anti-Black racism, and misogyny all coming into play. Linking these phenomena together in her khutbah, she signaled how the racialization of Islam by the US state produces an Islamophobia that affects both Black and non-Black American Muslims.

In her khutbah, Billoo drew on specific examples of anti-Muslim discrimination that she deals with through her work with CAIR. She described Muslims not being able to maintain stable employment because

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of their religious identities, or being too fearful to reach out for support when they did face bigotry.[35] Here Billoo drew a comparison between the discrimination that American Muslims face in their lives with the hardships that the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions faced for being Muslim in seventh-century Arabia. To this end, she stated, "we have a rich tradition of responding to oppression with dignity and steadfastness. Our tradition isn't one that simply reminds us of the sadness—instead it gives us hope and tools necessary to respond to make our best effort."[36] Like other WMA khateebahs, Billoo upheld the importance of the Islamic tradition in her khutbah, arguing that it contains within it tools to address American Muslims' contemporary and contextually specific concerns about Islamophobia. This relates back to the themes discussed earlier, in which we saw that WMA leaders and khateebahs tend to emphasize continuities with the Islamic tradition, even while congregants appear to have more flexible commitments to it.

Billoo also cited the Qur'an as a source that provides both hope and the tools to respond to Islamophobia, demonstrating how khateebahs put sacred texts in conversation with social issues, approaching it through an activist lens. From Qur'an 39:53, she quoted "Do not despair of the mercy of Allah" to argue that there are explicit Qur'anic instructions to persevere and stay positive.[37] She paraphrased other verses of the Qur'an[38] to emphasize reliance on God to get through hardships. Her advice to the WMA congregation about how to combat Islamophobia was two-pronged. Through a religious lens, she encouraged participants to read more Qur'an and draw strength from prayer, community, and charitable giving. In the second half of her khutbah, Billoo provided actionable advice, encouraging Muslims to be on the front lines of civic engagement, working toward causes like environmental and social justice.

Notably, Billoo expressed appreciation for how WMA leaders remind khateebahs to select timely subjects and provide a system of quality control with regard to guidelines for khutbahs. She lamented that khateebs (male preachers) at other mosques do not preach on timely subjects, implying that their messages are not always relevant to the social context of their congregants. As we saw earlier, many women similarly use binary descriptions to compare khutbahs at the WMA to those at other mosques through claims of relevance versus irrelevance, relatability versus abstraction, or nurture versus judgment. Billoo's commentary indicates that

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making Islamic teachings, sacred texts, and Prophetic examples relevant to the contemporary lives of American Muslims is central to the aims and overall narrative of the WMA. Putting sacred Islamic sources in conversation with American social movements, as Billoo and other WMA khateebahs do, represents their commitment to social justice.

Billoo concluded her khutbah with an English supplication that in part reads: "[Oh Allah!] Empower us to turn our weapons used against our community to bring smiles to tired and hungry faces. Shower them with justice. . . . Our hearts and souls bleed, but we trust in Your mercy. Forgive all those who have been unjustly killed by racist police officers.[39] Grant those who have lost their lives paradise . . . fill our souls with humility. Ameen."[40] Her supplication, seeking God's mercy and forgiveness for those who have lost their lives as victims of anti-Muslim bigotry and police brutality, underscores the multifaceted manifestations of Islamophobia. Between her criticism about the typical irrelevance of khutbahs at other mosques and her closing supplication that addresses the varied faces of anti-Muslim racism, Billoo is arguing that the American mosque should be a site to address current issues of injustice. Moreover, she points out how anti-Muslim racism in the US affects Black and non-Black Muslims in related ways. She also incorporates her professional expertise from the realm of Muslim civil rights activism to cultivate her authority as a WMA khateebah, using scriptures to encourage congregants to be more civically engaged with social justice causes.

Toward Community Building and Civic Engagement

> I can only hope that one day when Ramsey [my son] faces hate in this world . . . that he remembers that people love him and embrace him, that he is filled with enough compassion to respond with compassion, because eventually he will have to face it by himself.
> —Aziza Hasan, from her May 2015 khutbah, "Empowering Youth to Respond to Hate with Compassion"

Khateebahs Aziza Hasan and Farrah Khan represent two additional models of activist authority with their messages to build community ties and become politically active. In her khutbah from May 2015, titled

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"Empowering Youth to Respond to Hate with Compassion," Hasan, founder and director of the interfaith organization NewGround: A Muslim Jewish Partnership for Change, addressed the importance of teaching youth how to respond to religious hatred. Specifically, she spoke on the value of fostering relationships within the Muslim community and outside of it as a long-term tool to cope with anti-Muslim hate. Her khutbah focused on her personal experience of taking part in a Muslim-Jewish public prayer event that NewGround organized outside of Los Angeles City Hall. During this prayer event, Omar, the man who was designated as the leader for the Muslim prayer, faced a personal crisis when news broke that there was an active shooting in his hometown of Garland, Texas, where an anti-Muslim group had organized a "Draw Muhammad" contest. Rather than dropping out of the event, Omar instead decided to carry on as planned and relied on the support of the Muslim and Jewish communities who had gathered.

Hasan described being moved by this experience, especially since her four-year-old son, also in attendance, was able to witness the love and affection between supportive community members from two different faith traditions in the face of fear. Her message to the congregation was to find and keep compassion in the presence of hatred and to rely on each other for support. Hasan quoted Qur'anic verse 2:286 as inspiration to continue to do good works despite the existence of hatred:

> On no soul doth Allah Place a burden greater than it can bear. It gets every good that it earns, and it suffers every ill that it earns. Our Lord! Condemn us not if we forget or fall into error. Our Lord! Lay not on us a burden like that which Thou didst lay on those before us; Our Lord! Lay not on us a burden greater than we have strength to bear. Blot out our sins, and grant us forgiveness. Have mercy on us. Thou art our Protector; help us against those who stand against faith.[41]

Using this Qur'anic verse to ask for God's protection against anti-Muslim bigotry, Hasan explained that by remembering the compassion of God, Muslims could respond to rejection with compassion. As such, she extolled the virtues of creating new models of community, such as the interfaith alliances cultivated through NewGround. To her, building

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community is not only a virtue, but also a pragmatic tool to diffuse religious bigotry.

Whereas Hasan advocated for community building, Farrah Khan's khutbah from November 18, 2016—just ten days after the presidential election during which Donald Trump ran and won on an openly anti-Muslim, xenophobic platform—promoted Muslims' participation in local governance as a means to resist Islamophobia. Khan used verses from the Qur'an and specific hadith to urge the WMA congregants to become civically engaged and run for public office. She specifically cited Qur'an 13:11, which she translated as "Verily God does not change the people's condition unless they change their inner selves," as a basis for her claim. Khan framed her call for WMA congregants' increased involvement in local governance with personal reflections on losing a local election. Khan had run for city council in Irvine, California, that same month.

She recounted with pride that although she lost the election due to a last-minute smear campaign against her by an opposing candidate with greater financial resources, she had been successful in garnering the necessary endorsement from the Democratic Party and raising the requisite funds. To come to terms with her unsuccessful campaign, Khan cited this hadith: "If you ask, ask God. If you need help, seek it from God. Know that if the whole world were to gather together in order to help you, they would not be able to help you except if God had written it so. And if the whole world were to gather together in order to harm you, they would not harm you except if God had written it so. The pens have been lifted and the pages are dry." Khan used this hadith to assert the inevitability of God's will, seamlessly connecting sacred texts with the events in her own life. This mirrors the way that she and other khateebahs put scriptures in conversation with current social and political issues to promote activist causes—in this case her own foray into local politics and coping with her loss in the election.

Running for office helped Khan find peace and hope with the national election results after initially going through a cycle of denial, despair, and anger.[42] People from her Muslim networks who had not supported her campaign suddenly began to contact her in the days after the election, asking for advice on how to become trained in the US political system. Khan felt empowered seeing others participate in political protests

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since, in her view, the majority of American Muslims had been complacent for too long. Here she again invoked Qur'an 2:216 to bolster her argument about the necessity of civic engagement and fighting for social justice: "It may be that you dislike a thing while it is good for you and it may be that you love a thing while it is evil for you, and God knows what you do not."[43] Her primary focus was to encourage congregants to run for office, then secondarily to encourage those who did not want to run for public office to become involved in politics at the local level by participating in others' campaigns. As a third option, Khan said that those who were not inclined to participate in political campaigns should get involved with local policy makers who work on issues that they are passionate about, such as the environment, education, or safety.

Gendered Islamophobia

> It's a question I pose to Muslim women in our society today: what will break first, our spirit or our body? Islamophobia is a spiritual jihad of our generation, meeting our struggle. And it's a collective struggle. . . . Some of us, like millennial Muslims, were born into it [an era of hatred]. Our formative years happened here. The development of who we are took place under a complete assault on our identities, especially for Muslim girls.[44]
>
> —Amani Al-Khatahtbeh, from her January 2016 khutbah, "A Message for Muslim Youth"

Amani Al-Khatahtbeh's khutbah, delivered on the one-year anniversary of the WMA's inception, addressed how Islamophobia has shaped millennial American Muslim identity. Al-Khatahtbeh, the founder and editor-in-chief of Muslim Girl, an online magazine for American Muslim women, reflected on how Muslim youth might navigate the post-9/11 Islamophobia that has shaped their generation. Al-Khatahtbeh spent much of her youth feeling uncomfortable being Muslim, and as a young girl, self-consciousness prompted her to deny her identity to peers. For millennial Muslims like herself, she states, Islamophobia is the "spiritual jihad of our generation."[45] Their formative years were defined by hatred: "The development of who we are took place under a complete assault on

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our identities, especially for Muslim girls. Entire wars have been built on our backs, both physically and ideologically."[46] By singling out the experiences of Muslim girls, Al-Khatahtbeh's khutbah highlighted the gendered nature of Islamophobia and how women are especially vulnerable to anti-Muslim violence, particularly if they wear the hijab.

Al-Khatahtbeh's khutbah alludes to the contradictory roles that Muslim women play in Islamophobic discourses. On the one hand, their visibility as Muslims through modest forms of dress renders them as oppressed, and in this way, their bodies serve as political pawns to justify wars abroad based on Islamophobic rhetoric that they need to be liberated. On the other hand, this same visibility also renders them targets of anti-Muslim violence. Juliane Hammer summarizes the dissonant attitudes toward American Muslim women in her analysis of gendered Islamophobia:

> As objects of hate crimes and discrimination, Muslim women have Islamophobia mapped onto them directly and as representations of Muslims in American society; as objects of anti-Islamic discourse Muslim women are represented as victims of their religion, culture, and Muslim men, and thus in need of saving, liberation, and intervention.[47]

Hammer juxtaposes tropes of the oppressed Muslim woman that pervade mainstream American society, in both neoconservative and liberal circles alike, with the wholesale rejection of these same oppressed Muslim women as alien and un-American. Other scholars have analyzed in more detail the hypocrisy of white feminists who support US military interventions abroad in the name of saving Muslim women, despite the fact that these interventions further harm rather than liberate them.[48] Scholarship that addresses the intersections of white feminism, US military interests abroad, gendered violence, and debates over Muslim national belonging show how American Muslim women occupy a precarious position within broader discourses of Islamophobia. As we have seen, Muslim women, especially those who are visibly marked as other through hijab and/or modest clothing, bear the brunt of Islamophobic hate. They are also put under added pressure to remain silent about violence against them perpetrated by Muslim men based on the fact that they might further fuel Islamophobia. This fraught position partially

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informed Al-Khatahtbeh's motivation for starting Muslim Girl when she was seventeen. She wanted to create a space where Muslim girls could be allowed to "simply exist."

Muslim Girl achieved widespread success; it gained an impressive readership and has been featured across mainstream media outlets like *Teen Vogue* and the *Guardian*. Additionally, Al-Khatahtbeh was included in *Forbes*'s 30 Under 30 in Media in 2016 and named one of CNN's twenty-five most influential American Muslims of 2018. Muslim Girl ultimately served as an outlet for its readers to thrive and strengthen their identities as young Muslim women. Al-Khatahtbeh exposed how the prevailing context of anti-Muslim sentiment, particularly in its gendered form, has adversely affected young Muslim women.

While Al-Khatahtbeh has successfully built a brand based on elevating Muslim women's voices, some former staff members at Muslim Girl have reported a toxic and exploitative work culture, where their work was not always credited or fairly compensated.[49] Given how the broader US culture of anti-Muslim sentiment inspired Muslim Girl's inception, one possible way to read the allegations about its abusive work culture is an internalization of Islamophobia that facilitates devaluing Muslim women's work. Alternatively, one can view Muslim Girl as a thoroughly American brand that emerged in a corporate culture where the exploitation of female labor is the norm. Indeed, Muslim Girl is a part of a larger trend in the tech industry, where companies that brand themselves as feminist replicate the very same patterns of inequality and abuse that they aspire to correct.[50]

Nevertheless, Al-Khatahtbeh's khutbah, like Billoo's and Hasan's, sheds light on how Islamophobia informs American Muslims' conceptions of their own identities. It encourages WMA congregants to stand up for themselves against anti-Muslim discrimination and "reclaim their narratives" in the media. Focusing on how Muslim women in particular are targeted by Islamophobia, Al-Khatahtbeh states in her khutbah that they need to prioritize taking care of themselves physically, mentally, and spiritually to be able to counter the discrimination they face. Her khutbah, like the others discussed in this chapter, demonstrates how the broader context of American Muslims' marginalization as social and political others drives them toward social justice causes, countering their own and others' intersecting oppressions.

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Reading Islam as Social Justice

> We sit here today in the City of Angels in the historic Pico Union Project miles from South LA where the city burned years ago because of police brutality and institutional racism against our Black brothers and sisters, which still runs deep. This is the city where immigrants seek gainful work for a better life while finding themselves struggling every day, a city where housing is not affordable, where race tensions are high, where water is scarce, where environmental segregation negatively impacts poor communities of color the most . . . this is the reality in a city that gets known for Hollywood films, luxury, and sunshine. This is the other Los Angeles, and I'm here today to talk to you about the *amana*, or covenant God bestowed on human kind, and the choice we have to take it on.[51]
> —Sarah Jawaid, from her March 2015 khutbah, "Being a Steward of God's People and Planet"

Many congregants routinely identified the WMA as the first or only mosque they had seen address social justice issues, which contributed to its appeal for them. Yet Muslim preachers across the globe have often used Islamic scriptures to promote social justice causes. The particulars of their message, however, are always context-specific. For example, in Egypt, khateebs might draw on Islamic sources to address alleviating poverty and concerns such as the rising cost of bread. Similarly, Sarah Jawaid's khutbah, redolent of Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 speech on poverty and inequality "The Other America," in its reference to "the other Los Angeles," highlighted local social justice concerns. These concerns included police brutality against African Americans, the economic hardships of working-class immigrant communities, affordable housing, drought, and environmental degradation. I read congregants' claims to the WMA's "first-ness" as testimony that they feel their interests and values as American Muslims are represented at the WMA as opposed to their other American mosques. Moreover, khateebahs' regular references to structural racism, police brutality, and mass incarceration, which disproportionately affect Black Americans, indicate that the WMA cultivates a contextually specific American Islam.

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In constructing an American Islam, khateebahs integrate new concepts—for example, social and environmental justice and anti-Black racism—into the conceptual universe of the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition. WMA khateebahs are not unique in this interpretive move. For example, Islamic studies scholar Omid Safi describes progressive Muslims as engaging with scriptures while working toward social justice, gender equality, and pluralism.[52] These values align with the broader agenda of Muslim feminist scholars. Safi suggests that the imperative for social justice has always been "at the heart of Islamic social ethics" through the textual tradition.[53] Jawaid's khutbah, which focuses on the concept of *khilafa* (stewardship), conforms to Safi's imperative to use scriptural teachings to deal with "the here and now" rather than the distant future.

In her introductory remarks, Jawaid urges Muslims to take on the responsibility of stewardship: "I'm going to talk about social and environmental justice, which is how I am framing being a steward of the earth. To me, being a steward means owning your story, owning your impact on the earth, owning your power as a trustee of God's covenant. There is no one else coming; we are it."[54] Jawaid grounds her claims in the Qur'an, citing surah 33, verse 72, which in its entirety reads: "We offered the Trust to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, yet they refused to undertake it and were afraid of it: mankind undertook it—they have always been very inept and rash."[55] As Jawaid explains, the Trust represents a covenant with God for human beings to do good to each other and to the earth. Given that Jawaid is a community organizer at a faith-based nonprofit and was previously the director of Green Muslims, an organization that promotes environmentalist causes from an Islamic perspective, her authority at the WMA derives from her environmental-activist profile.[56] Furthermore, she incorporates her professional commitments to environmental and social justice into her interpretation of this Qur'anic verse, thereby exercising authority through her activism.

In keeping with the WMA's emphasis on textual authority, Jawaid grounds her arguments for environmental and racial justice in scripture. She states that, in the Qur'an, God commands believers to reflect on the signs of nature, and highlights that many chapters of the Qur'an make explicit the correlation between nature and scripture. For her, this means that Muslims should protect the environment and reduce waste

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by conserving water during *wudu* (ritual ablution) and avoid using Styrofoam in mosques. Furthermore, Jawaid invokes the Sunnah to argue that Muslims should oppose injustice and help the vulnerable by working to dismantle mass incarceration. She argues that, if the Prophet Muhammad were alive today, he would work with the disadvantaged to protect the vulnerable. Additionally, in calling for the end of rampant police brutality and institutional racism against Black Americans, she references the Qur'anic narrative of Moses asking God to enable him to overcome his speech impediment in approaching Pharaoh, using it to argue that all Muslims should stand up against injustice.[57]

By framing Islamic scriptures as a means to address modern injustices like institutional racism, police brutality, lack of affordable housing, and environmental degradation, Jawaid makes a case for the relevance of the Qur'an and Sunnah in the local American context. Specifically, she uses Islamic teachings to articulate a moral critique of US policy, and further argues that American Muslims are obligated to address injustice. She emphasizes injustices that affect Americans across racial and ethnic identities, and calls on Muslims to unite as they strive to overcome them.

Jawaid's move toward Muslim unity is continuous with a longer historical trend in which American Muslims began to look to their religion rather than ethnic background to define their identities. During the Cold War era, American Muslims were united across ethnic and racial difference by their shared distress over US foreign policy, for example with respect to US support for Israel and Saudi Arabia and interventions in Iran and Vietnam.[58] Curtis argues that shared concerns over US exertions of power abroad unified American Muslims across their diverse religious forms.[59] Likewise, stating that the Prophet Muhammad himself would be striving to end mass incarceration, Jawaid identified social injustices in LA and the US as issues that *all* American Muslims should be concerned about in solidarity with Black Americans and other marginalized groups.

Building Solidarity: Toward a Collective American Muslim Consciousness

> The first step is asking ourselves how does racism exist within us? . . . Our Muslim communities incorporate the

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> same racial hierarchy that the rest of America does. A common criticism of an immigrant Pakistani or South Asian mosque is that they're not in solidarity with their African American brothers and sisters in Islam. If we're supposed to be living examples of the Prophet's message then we have to address this question. How will we deal with the racial hierarchy that exists inside our own communities?
> —Sarah Jawaid, more from her March 2015 khutbah, "Being a Steward of God's People and Planet"

Jawaid's khutbah attends to local social justice concerns, bringing to the fore the idea of a "shared Muslim American consciousness" of Black and immigrant Muslims in the US. The emergence of a shared "Muslim American consciousness," as Curtis describes it, after World War II stands in contrast with trends in the first half of the twentieth century in which American Muslims typically emphasized their ethnic identities to argue for their recognition as citizens. This approach stemmed from exclusionary immigration and citizenship laws that restricted emigration from non-European countries and limited citizenship to white immigrants. Scholar of Islam in America Kambiz GhaneaBassiri notes how both Muslim and non-Muslim immigrant groups in the US in the first half of the twentieth century had to contend with the hegemonic "matrix of whiteness, Christianity, and progress that had come to constitute America's national identity."[60] Since citizenship was tied to whiteness (and by extension, Christianity) during the early twentieth century, Muslim immigrants focused on their ethnic and racial rather than their religious identities to make a case for their naturalization before the courts. Immigrants' (Muslim or otherwise) appeal to legal whiteness demonstrates how the requirements of US citizenship have historically pitted American immigrant communities against African American communities and one another. While the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act significantly diversified the American demographic, normative American identity continues to be bound up in notions of whiteness and Christianity, and necessarily excludes Black Americans.

The impact of white supremacy in part accounts for contemporary divides between the Black and immigrant American Muslim communities that Jamillah Karim analyzes in her 2009 study of Muslim women

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in Chicago and Atlanta. Karim shows how Black and immigrant American Muslims have mutually conflicting relationships with whiteness, and that immigrant Muslims actually benefit from anti-Black racism. Immigrant Muslim communities in the US are focused on cultivating transnational ties with Muslims abroad rather than forging meaningful connections with African American Muslims in their own communities. Karim finds that her South Asian Muslim informants did not identify the socioeconomic struggles of their African American Muslim neighbors as a "Muslim cause," tending instead to focus on social justice concerns overseas in places like Palestine or Kashmir.[61] In Jawaid's khutbah, she laments the lack of solidarity from immigrant Muslims. The immigrant Muslim focus on social justice causes abroad is not only born from anti-Black racism in the US, but is also rooted in questions about Islamic authenticity. Zareena Grewal describes how, throughout the last few decades of the twentieth century, immigrant Muslims' cultivation of a counter-citizenship culture that committed to the idea of a global ummah "became a dominant mode of Islamic authentication."[62] As Muslim immigrants continued to arrive in the US throughout the late twentieth century, there was an increase in "the nostalgic sense of attachment to immigrants' countries of origins and the exaggerated political importance of the Middle East."[63] As a result, US mosques shifted from focusing on local concerns to "global political events in the Muslim third world."[64] Grewal marks 9/11 as a turning point when immigrant Muslim leaders began to lay claim to their identities as Americans. Nevertheless, her observations about the importance of transnational connections for immigrant Muslims may in part account for WMA congregants' critiques of the "irrelevance" of khutbahs at mainstream US mosques.

Jawaid also calls for immigrant Muslim communities to hold themselves accountable for how they replicate the racial hierarchies that devalue Black Muslims within their own communities. These racial hierarchies within Muslim communities are apparent in how, as wadud shows, African American Muslims are excluded from religious leadership roles in the United States. wadud argues that the marginalization of Black Muslims in America is intertwined with matters of class and financial resources, as immigrant Muslims in general are more affluent than African American Muslims. She also argues that there is an interpersonal arrogance and condescension that plays out in relationships between Black and immigrant

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Muslims who are part of the same communities, wherein the latter often assume the role of teachers.[65] These are the trends to which Jawaid alludes in her khutbah when she criticizes how many Muslim communities perpetuate immigrant hegemony, wherein Black Muslims and their religious practices are infantilized and devalued as South Asian and Arab cultures are elevated as more authentically Islamic.

The history of Islam in the US is a complex web of encountering, intermixing, and negotiating religious and racial differences.[66] The histories of Black and immigrant American Muslims have always been connected but are not parallel. During the late nineteenth century, Bengali shipmen from British India migrated to New Orleans and New York City and integrated into Black and Latino working-class communities through marriage.[67] Though many of their Black and Puerto Rican wives converted to Islam and retained and passed down their Islamic practices to their children, the Bengali shipmen were legally categorized as "Negro" by the US state, thereby muting their Muslim identities. In the twentieth century, the NOI appropriated Islam as a religion that would help America's Black citizens restore their racial integrity.[68] At the same time, in critiques of Western imperialism, Islamic revivalists like the Pakistani Abul A'la Mawdudi "found common cause with many Muslim Black nationalists."[69] By the last few decades of the twentieth century, Black and immigrant American Muslim interests were not always aligned or uniformly opposed but consistently bound up in questions of race, American identity, and Islamic authenticity. The next section turns to how WMA khateebahs engage the question of Islamic authenticity by emphasizing how their commitments to social justice stem from their readings of sacred scripture, as opposed to externally held values.

Racial and Gender Equality in the Qur'an

> I am a peacemaker and I am an activist because of my tradition, not in spite of it. I didn't come to this place because I moved away from my tradition; I came to this place of love, of restorative love, because of my tradition, and the love of the Qur'an and the love of the Sunnah.[70]
> —Najeeba Syeed, from her October 2015 khutbah, "Restorative Social Justice and Radical Love"

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Just as Jawaid refers to the Prophetic Sunnah and particular Qur'anic verses to support social justice causes, Najeeba Syeed's khutbah, excerpted above, does the same. Like others, Syeed credits her Muslim faith for her commitment to social justice activism. Using Qur'anic verses while also referring to specific hadith and the Prophetic Sunnah, khateebahs frame contemporary American social issues such as racism, environmental justice, and the representation of Muslims in US governance. Syeed for example, contends that Muslims have a moral imperative to stand up for those in their own communities and those outside of it, grounding her argument in the Islamic tradition. She references both contemporary and historical Muslim scholars like William Chittick (b. 1943), Ibn Arabi (d. 1240), al-Ghazali (d. 1111), and al-Shatibi (d. 1388) to support her broader arguments about what Muslims can contribute to achieving social justice.[71] Like other khateebahs, Syeed also draws attention to anti-Black racism and uses scriptural references to argue for the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Khateebahs' attention to racial injustice sets the WMA apart from other US mosques since, as wadud describes, issues of race and class seldom receive attention even in progressive feminist Muslim discourse.[72] Many WMA khutbahs go against this trend and demonstrate the WMA's heightened sensitivity to issues of racism toward African American Muslims within their religious communities and the broader American context. These values are based upon readings of Qur'anic verses that incorporate particular ideas about social justice. For example, in her khutbah, Jawaid calls upon WMA members to examine their own biases and reflect on how everyone internalizes racial and gender hierarchies. She invokes the example of Hagar to argue for the elevated status that God granted a woman of color, and notes the central importance of Hagar's experience for all Muslim pilgrims on the Hajj. As WMA khateebahs tackle the issue of intra-Muslim racism and acknowledge Muslim complicity with the larger structures of oppression and white supremacy in US culture, they take up wadud's challenge to work toward a more inclusive collective space for American Muslims.

As we have seen throughout this book, wadud's scholarship and activism resonates with a number of WMA's khutbahs, whether she is explicitly cited or not. Jawaid's khutbah is no exception to this broader trend in the way that she also deploys the Qur'an to argue for social

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and racial justice. On the subject of racial and ethnic difference, wadud argues that the Qur'an "supports and acknowledges difference between peoples but does not use those differences as a standard of judgment for human worth."[73] As evidence of this claim, she cites three verses from Qur'an 49:11–13:

> Oh you have attained to faith! No men shall deride (other men) . . . and no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. Be conscious of God. Oh humankind! Behold, We have created you all from one male and one female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily the most noble of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of God.[74]

wadud's understanding of these verses reflects her conviction that the Qur'an here endorses "ethnic parity."[75] To her, these verses champion an egalitarian society whose merits are based on God-consciousness, or *taqwa*, rather than gender, class, or race.[76] In wadud's view, then, the Qur'an has an essentially egalitarian nature, and attitudes of racism and sexism are therefore antithetical to Islam. Notably, Jawaid uses this same Qur'anic verse, 49:13, to challenge her audience to engage with other Muslims across cultures, and in particular to cultivate solidarity with African American Muslims.

Scholars throughout Islamic history have interpreted this surah quite differently. The institution of slavery, which is antithetical to contemporary understandings of social justice and egalitarianism, was very much a social reality in the seventh-century Arabian context in which these verses were revealed. And as recently as the twentieth century, the Egyptian Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1996) saw these verses as specifically referring not to racism or classism, but to the sins of slander and backbiting and the importance of sincere faith-based *taqwa*.[77] By reading her particular ideas of gender, racial, and social parity as morally exemplary values into the Qur'an, Jawaid exercises her religious authority by then introducing and legitimizing this scriptural reading at the WMA.[78]

Jawaid's engagements with the Qur'an are of course historically situated in her US context, and I do not read her as claiming to reveal essen-

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tial truths about the "true" meaning of the Qur'an. Deep-seated concerns about racial inequalities, universal human rights, and environmental waste are the product of a contemporary US moment, rather than based on the Qur'an itself. Jawaid has framed her Qur'anic interpretations with her professional and personal values by, for example, acknowledging in her khutbah that her interpretations of specific Qur'anic verses are informed by her work as a community organizer and anti-racism activist. While she presented racial and economic equality as moral imperatives, she never explicitly categorizes them as the only valid interpretations of the text. In fact, throughout her khutbah, Jawaid qualified many of her Qur'anic interpretations with the phrase "to me," adding "this is the Sunnah as I understand it" after invoking the example of the Prophet to advocate for anti-racist legal initiatives.[79] Jawaid's alluding to the essential nature of egalitarianism in the Qur'an can be read as a rhetorical strategy. She appropriated verses of the Qur'an and applied them to the circumstances around her, demonstrating the fluidity of the text itself.[80]

Jawaid does not argue for the essential coherence of a Qur'anic worldview that adequately measures up against contemporary standards of gender and racial equity. Instead, her rhetoric emphasizes her particular relationship to the Qur'an. This interpretative strategy is similar to that of wadud, who claims that individuals can arrive at an authoritative reading based on their own circumstances, irrespective of communal consensus (*ijma*).[81] In this vein, Jawaid enjoined her audience to act as stewards of the earth per the Qur'anic injunction, on the basis of their own individual circumstances and motivations.[82] Jawaid's khutbah thus challenges patriarchal notions of interpretive authority by not only claiming authority for herself, but also by conferring it upon the members of the WMA congregation. By authorizing congregants to take on social justice work both as individuals and as a community, the WMA acts as a venue for collective anti-racist work. This stance was exemplified in the 2016 discussion series on Black Lives Matter.

Black Lives Matter: A WMA Discussion Series

> I heard the Messenger of Allah say, "Whosoever of you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand; and if he is not able to do so, then [let him change it] with his tongue; and if he is

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not able to do so, then with his heart—and that is the weakest of faith."[83]
—from al-Nawawi's 40 Hadith, cited at the WMA's 2016 BLM Discussion Session 1

In the months of July, August, and September 2016, the WMA hosted a three-part discussion series on Black Lives Matter (BLM) during the regularly scheduled reflection circles after Jummah.[84] The first two were co-facilitated by two Black Muslim women—Kameelah Wilkerson, one of the WMA's past khateebahs, and Desha Dauchan, a member of the BLM movement—while the last was led by mosque founder Maznavi. Wilkerson and Dauchan approached the sessions using the above hadith tradition about condemning evil with the hand, tongue, and heart.[85] They began a discussion with WMA congregants about hating injustice in one's heart, then moving forward to speaking out against injustice, until lastly taking action to address it.[86] Using this hadith to promote racial justice in the US is continuous with broader trends in African American Muslim communities that have historically engaged Islamic teachings to resist racism. Through these and other structured conversations, the WMA attempts to challenge the anti-Black racism of many American Muslim communities. As we have seen, the intersections of anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism enable WMA congregants to cultivate a shared American Muslim social consciousness among Black and non-Black Muslims. However, these same intersections also pose specific challenges to the WMA's institutional attempts to address anti-Black racism, and congregants come away with varied experiences of these engagements.

Participants expressed mixed feelings about the efficacy of these 2016 discussions, in part because they approached them with differing expectations. Race, age, and political commitments informed WMA attendees' reflections on the series. Some felt that the discussions did not have the depth that they would have liked, while others expressed satisfaction with the series. On the other end of the spectrum, one of my interlocutors (white and in her seventies) explicitly stated her disapproval of BLM as a whole, despite agreeing with the motivations driving the movement. It is worth highlighting that I did not prompt each of the women in this study to reflect on these sessions, but rather only asked those who

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brought up the BLM sessions organically during our conversations. Despite clear differences in personal reflections on the series, there was general agreement that the sessions were valuable, even among women whose individual expectations were not met.

My interlocutors generally fell into three categories: those who felt the BLM series was well intentioned but unproductive, those who were disappointed and underwhelmed, and those who were proud and mostly satisfied. These different reactions were not neatly divided across racial identity or age, and therefore provide a window into the nonlinear and sometimes inconsistent visions of interracial solidarity throughout the WMA. Women in the first category believed that the BLM discussion series was a good idea for the WMA, but that it was perhaps premature for the congregation. For example, Zahara, African American and in her sixties, felt that many of her fellow congregants lacked the knowledge of African American history required to understand the BLM movement, much less learn how to be allies. Reflecting on the BLM sessions, she stated:

> The truth of the matter is so many of the people who were there truly did not have a background in the history of African Americans in this country. So it's not even a matter of them not caring; you're just asking them to understand more than they can understand. . . . The bottom line [is] you got to bring information first. You can't say to somebody, "I need you to understand the framework of this problem. I need you to commit to helping with this," et cetera, et cetera. They don't even know what the problem is. . . . The young women [among WMA congregants] did not know that there had been a commissioned study to actually move all the Africans from this country. You can't have a discussion with somebody about something they don't know anything about.[87]

While Zahara believed the BLM movement was an important topic to discuss at the WMA and in mosques more generally, she felt that the series was likely lost on most congregants. She summed up the attitude of some in the congregation as, "Their thing was like, 'Why are these Black people complaining about this culture? They just aren't trying.' They simply don't know the history."[88] Zahara spoke in a matter-of-fact tone with no hints of frustration as she described how some of her fellow WMA

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congregants had no prior knowledge of institutional anti-Black racism in the US, despite most of them having been born and raised there. Her evenness and patience likely comes with the experience of being Black in America for over six decades and being a part of different kinds of Muslim communities with all sorts of attitudes toward racism in the US. Rather than faulting individual congregants for their ignorance of US history and African Americans' place within it, Zahara attributed these congregants' attitudes to the racism embedded within the structure of American society. Specifically, she explained that erasure of Black history is part and parcel of the US education system, which is designed to promote and circulate white supremacy.[89] Indeed, in the years since Zahara shared these reflections with me, the role of schools in upholding the status quo of white supremacy has become a subject of heated political debate in the US. By July 2021, twenty-six states had already introduced legislation that would ban (or limit) teachers from discussing critical race theory and racism.[90] As far as Zahara's reflection on the WMA's Black Lives Matter discussion series, she connected WMA congregants' lack of ability to fully engage with the issues presented to structural racism.

As one of its most regular congregants, Zahara was deeply enthusiastic about and invested in the WMA as an institution, and appreciated that Maznavi and her team worked actively toward creating a "truly multicultural" space.[91] Her remarks were not a personal criticism of the WMA or its individual members, but rather a reflection of the structural barriers to forging meaningful interracial understanding even within the confines of a well-intentioned community. For Zahara, young non-Black Muslims needed basic education in African American history, from slavery through the civil rights era to the contemporary realities of Black experiences in the US, including but not limited to barriers to acquiring housing, access to better neighborhoods, and employment. Such education had to happen before a meaningful dialogue about race, and the movement for Black lives, could occur at the WMA.

Rana, a South Asian American in her early thirties, also felt that many WMA congregants lacked a nuanced understanding of African American history, but expected the BLM series to fill in these gaps. She represents the second category of those who were disappointed by the series as a whole. Describing the series as a "super-rudimentary discussion about race," Rana felt underwhelmed:

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> I would have liked to have a slightly more well thought-out actual instructional lesson on race and just the history of Black people in America. I think a lot of people just don't know a lot of those nuances of . . . the history of racism in this country. I think a lot of people hold the view, "oh there was slavery, and then there was the civil rights movement, and then it was done." They don't know about redlining and the housing policies, mass incarceration, all the other things that happened that were codified into law that held Black people back. So I wish we had gotten into more of that stuff, like structural racism, and we didn't. It was very rudimentary. So maybe for other people, that was a good place for them but . . . I don't think they connected to real action.[92]

Rana was particularly critical of the final BLM discussion, where congregants were broken up into affinity circles of small groups of people who shared their racial and ethnic identities. In Rana's estimation, this ensured that a more nuanced discussion of race, with tangible advice for congregants to implement into action, would be impossible. At the same time, however, Rana went on to praise the WMA's leaders for hosting the series in the first place. "Just putting it into context—how many other mosques are having a BLM discussion series after their service?" she asked. "It's great that they even did that. So I think that's the caveat—it's great they did it, but it wasn't perfect."[93]

Other members of the congregation, especially those in their twenties and thirties from immigrant backgrounds, like Rana, highlighted how the WMA had set itself apart from other mosques by hosting a series on BLM. This demonstrates the symbolic importance to young immigrant American Muslims of the WMA openly discussing anti-Black racism. Such direct engagement with anti-Black racism bolstered the WMA's authority in their eyes, giving them the sense that the mosque aligned with their progressive values. For example, Leila, an Arab American in her early thirties, was drawn to the WMA's "visceral engagement" with diversity and its acknowledgement that systems of oppression affect Black people differently than immigrant Muslims.[94] Rana and Leila, young second-generation immigrant Muslims, felt that the BLM series was a step in the right direction, particularly in attempting to address the intra-Muslim racism and immigrant hegemony that typically characterize South Asian– and Arab-led congregations.

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These women's assessments contrast with that of Ibtihal, an African American in her late thirties, who spoke to me of the frustrating experience of navigating the WMA as a Black Muslim. On the BLM series, she reflected:

> I felt like it was lip service to the conversation of BLM, but it wasn't really a conversation around BLM. It was just cluelessness, quite honestly. I feel like it was a sincere attempt . . . I just felt they were kind of clueless about things, you know? I say that with all due respect, but that's [my] experience of people who attempt to be allies.[95]

Ibtihal's comments indicate that there is a lot more work to be done in creating a worship space that can foster meaningful dialogue about the intersections of race, religion, and gender. When I asked Ibtihal to speak generally on whether she saw the WMA as a place where people were conscious of racial injustice, she responded that it was not a matter of people being unconscious or conscious of race. She felt that some at the WMA believed that all people of color, whether Black, Arab, or South Asian, had their own equal racial burdens to bear. This attitude frustrated her because she felt it precluded non-Black congregants from understanding the distinct African American experience. To her, such acknowledgement was required for a more substantial discussion on BLM.[96] That some congregants, according to Ibtihal, failed to differentiate between the struggles that non-Black people of color and Black Americans face highlights the broader challenges of interracial solidarity building. This dynamic can work to mask anti-Blackness in non-Black communities of color, or otherwise sideline and erase Black voices. Even in spaces committed to cultivating interracial solidarity, overcoming anti-Black attitudes and learning how to be an ally poses challenges for even those individuals eager to be in solidarity.

On the other end of the spectrum, the third category of response to the BLM series included those who had no criticisms to share. Sabrina, a South Asian American in her mid-thirties, expressed only positive remarks when thinking about the sessions, focusing on how remarkable it was that the WMA hosted such an event.[97] And Kenyatta, a Black attendee in her mid-forties and an activist in her own right, recalls the

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BLM sessions with fondness while describing her personal journey of becoming a recent member of the movement herself.[98]

Maznavi facilitated the final BLM session with the affinity circles, and her own assessment of the series reflected a combination of congregants' different attitudes. Like others, Maznavi attested to the rudimentary nature of the 2016 sessions, but characterized elementary conversations about race as particularly valuable for non-Black Muslims. One of her motivations for hosting a BLM discussion series at the WMA was to help non-Black congregants develop an increased awareness of their "blind spots" regarding racial prejudice, so that they could learn how to "step up" and support "their fellow Black Muslims."[99] Pursuant to this goal, her affinity circle exercise (that Rana above was critical of) was designed to put congregants at ease and encourage them to express themselves openly within their own racial and ethnic groups without fear of judgment from others.

Overall, Maznavi was pleased with the affinity circle exercise because it pushed white congregants to think of themselves as racialized and elicited some discomfort from them. She explained,

> I thought it was extremely successful because the white group—so many of them were like, "Oh, we have to do this?" They were so uncomfortable, and afterwards a couple of them were cringing and coming up to me and really like, "Oh, I really didn't like that. I felt so uncomfortable." One of them literally said, "It's the first time I've had to feel like I'm a different race." I was like, "Oh, so you had no idea you were a different race so you just thought you were the norm." . . . I'm so glad that we did that because it was the first time that they thought of themselves as separate in the way that the rest of us [people of color] have [seen ourselves].[100]

Maznavi's aim for the BLM series, much like her approach to the WMA's goals more broadly, was to "meet people where they are" and facilitate a basic conversation.[101] She describes feeling satisfied with how the affinity group exercise pushed white congregants out of their comfort zone to think about what it means to identify as a racial group, as opposed to assuming that only people of color have a racialized identity. I did not ask any of my white interlocutors about their responses to the affinity circle

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exercise, though I expect they may not have been as forthcoming with me about their discomfort as they were with Maznavi, whom they knew well. I also did not share their white identity nor did I have the shared experiences of being there with them for any of the BLM sessions. Likewise, it is conceivable that Black congregants like Zahara and Ibtihal may have tempered their critiques of the BLM series since it was most likely the case that women who shared my South Asian identity or were otherwise non-Black were the ones unaware of Black history and of the differences between how Black Americans and non-Black people of color experience racism. Still, congregants' comments and critiques provide us with a snapshot of the spectrum of congregant reactions to the series.

Congregants' opposing perspectives on the discussion series cohered into a single narrative that ultimately demonstrated similar characterizations of the WMA community as a whole. For example, while Rana was critical of the affinity circle exercise, she conceded that, as Maznavi suggested, for some people it might have provided a much-needed rudimentary discussion on race. Likewise, Zahara and Ibtihal were respectively neutral and frustrated about the series, but both suggested that the majority of the non-Black congregants at the WMA were ill-suited at the time to be proper allies to Black Muslims and Black Americans more broadly.

The differences in WMA members' reactions to the BLM series reflect their contrasting attitudes toward the objectives of the sessions. The wide range of reactions also reflects the spectrum of congregants' individual understandings of what it means to have a racialized religious identity. For some folks, acknowledging their own non-Black racial identities as also constructed and embedded within hierarchical patterns of power and privilege was an important step toward understanding the experiences of Black Muslims and non-Muslims in the US. For others who were ready to explore tangible measures they and others could take to combat racial injustice at the structural and personal levels, the WMA's BLM series left much to be desired. There were also those who may have desired for themselves a more nuanced and sophisticated conversation around BLM, but did not feel confident that the majority of the congregation had the tools to engage at that higher level.

Since the WMA is a multiracial congregation, addressing anti-Black racism and Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism together as a commu-

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nity generates multiple narratives and experiences among congregants. Anti-Muslim racism, which affects all American Muslims in distinct ways, is built on the broader institutional culture of anti-Black racism in the US. The broader American context therefore also informs how American Muslims appropriate anti-Black racism into their own communities. Moreover, the WMA's effort to address anti-Black racism can be seen as a part of a deeper legacy of Islam as a religion of protest against racial oppression in the US. In the contemporary context of the BLM movement, anthropologist Donna Auston has shown that its Muslim women participants view their anti-racist activism as a part of their religious obligations.[102]

Congregants' reflections on the BLM discussion series at the WMA demonstrate how American Muslims, both Black and non-Black, contend with the linkages between anti-Muslim and anti-Black racism. As a multiracial space, the WMA provides a way for Black and immigrant Muslims to construct a shared American consciousness based on social justice. Drawing from their justice-oriented interpretations of the Qur'an, WMA members fit into a broader historical trend of Black and immigrant American Muslims turning to religion as a way to address moral injustice. While some aspects are challenging, such as creating meaningful dialogue about anti-Black racism across multiple racial and ethnic identities, the WMA seeks to cultivate a socially and politically conscious congregation in addition to providing prayer services. Participating in events like the BLM discussion series, in turn, further crystallizes these congregants' sense of their own authority in and outside of the mosque, since they are having discussions of social justice in the wider context of the US as Muslim women.

Cultivating Sociopolitical Values at the Mosque

> The truth is that this country was built on the brutal land grab and near genocide of the Native Americans and on the vicious African slave system that made the United States the richest country in the world. The common reference to all of us as immigrants seeking the American dream or a better life in the United States is patently untrue. It ignores history, excludes and marginalizes the original people of this land,

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> and attempts to ignore four hundred years of chattel slavery of Africans, followed by a vicious racist system that Americans must battle to this very day.[103]
> —Hajjah Abrafi Sanyika, from her October 2019 khutbah, "Balancing Religion and Culture—from an African-American Muslim"

The WMA's khutbahs on Islamophobia and social justice, and its 2016 BLM sessions, demonstrate how for its congregants it is more than an alternative worship space where women gather for prayer. It is also a discursive space where its members reflect together on contemporary American social issues. The WMA provides an outlet for American Muslim women to cultivate not just Islamic literacy through knowledge of the Qur'an but also particular sociopolitical values through a variety of means, including khutbahs like Sanyika's above that provide counterhegemonic narratives of history. These counterhegemonic narratives engage with the reality of the US as a settler colonial state rather than accepting at face value its euphemistic designation as a "nation of immigrants." Such views are absent not only from mainstream US mosque culture but also the nation's public education system more broadly, making Sanyika's khutbah and others like it at the WMA all the more notable.

One way to understand how the social and political dimensions of the WMA fit into American religious history is through the example of the Black church and women's roles within it. Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that, during the period between 1880 and 1920, the Black church functioned as "a discursive, critical arena—a public sphere in which values and issues were aired, debated, and disseminated throughout the larger black community."[104] In her analysis of the National Baptist Convention, one of the largest Protestant denominations of Black Americans, she contends that Black women were integral to the discursive arena of the church; they actively contested racism and advocated for voting rights, desegregation, equal employment, and education opportunities in the US.[105]

Higginbotham's example of the political activism of the Black church in the late nineteenth century has a parallel in American Islam, albeit a bit later. Curtis notes that, by the mid-twentieth century, American

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mosques began to resemble churches and synagogues in their organizational structure but also in the fact that they became "more than a place for prayer," as the site of community and the discussion of politics.[106] The legacy of the Black church and its role in developing a national consciousness among Black Americans, alongside the evolution of American religious congregations as sociopolitical spaces of community, provides a template to think about the WMA project as a whole. It is a mosque that is committed to not only providing worship services for women but also fostering political and social activism. Khateebahs attempt to generate collective American Muslim interest in particular social justice concerns like anti-Black racism in American society, including within its Muslim communities.

Sanyika's 2019 khutbah educates congregants on the history of the US and the legacies of African slavery. It is particularly salient within the political context of 2020 and efforts by then President Trump and Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas to ban schools from teaching the 1619 Project, a Pulitzer Prize–winning *New York Times* initiative by Nikole Hannah-Jones that sheds lights on the centrality of slavery and anti-Black racism in US history. In September 2020, Trump announced a commission to promote a "patriotic education" curriculum that would further downplay slavery and its enduring legacy, and designate critical race theory as "left-wing indoctrination" in an effort to instill "pro-American" attitudes in students.[107]

Yet Trump's preferred whitewashed version of US history had already been the norm prior to 2020. Sanyika's remarks excerpted above were part of her reflections on a khutbah she had heard at a local mosque where the imam, an immigrant from Turkey, had "encouraged the Muslim ummah, the community, to be loyal and grateful for our acceptance into the United States where he said we have come to pursue a better life." She recounted feeling "appalled" at this broad, generalized statement that applied only to immigrant Muslims: "It erases the experiences of many of us in the congregation. African Americans did not come here for a better life, nor did the Native Americans who were already here." Her sentiments are broadly reflective of the widespread erasure of African Americans and Natives in revisionist characterizations of all Americans as having immigrant origins, a narrative that works to conceal the nation's enduring systems of racial oppression. Moreover,

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Sanyika's khutbah draws attention to the erasure of Black Muslims in US history, both the enslaved African Muslims forcibly brought to US soil through the transatlantic slave trade and early twentieth-century movements like the Moorish Science Temple and the NOI that were led by Black American Muslims.

Sanyika's khutbah offers a corrective to the inaccurate assumption that Islam in America is exclusively the domain of "immigrant" Islamic cultures. This idea is widely perpetuated by non-Black Muslims, whether inadvertently or as a part of a conscious effort to delegitimize expressions of Black Islam as inauthentic.[108] Black American Muslim scholars like wadud, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, and Donna Auston refer to these tensions in their scholarship, addressing the deteriorating relationship dynamics between Black and immigrant American Muslims, and the "doubly liminal"[109] space that Black Muslims occupy in the US, where Black culture is valued over and at the expense of Black lives.[110]

Describing a very similar exchange to Sanyika's encounter with the Turkish American imam at a California mosque, wadud states that when she describes herself as "American by force," Muslim immigrants routinely reply, "'If you don't like it . . . then you should leave."[111] As wadud explains, "There is nothing in my statement that says what I like or dislike. . . . I will always be American because my options to be something else were taken away once my fore-mothers were raped by white owners and my blood line was further blended with other Black, native-American and white lines throughout my past."[112] The hostile reactions that wadud receives from immigrant Muslims reveal a fundamental misunderstanding about African Americans' place within US history. Sanyika's khutbah, with its explicit references to the enduring legacies of slavery and the roles of prominent Black Muslim leaders in US history from Noble Drew Ali of the Moorish Science Temple (MST) to Elijah and Clara Muhammad and the broader impact of the NOI on the trajectory of Islam in America, fills in some of these critical gaps of knowledge.

Moreover, Sanyika's khutbah addresses the tensions between immigrant and indigenous Black (and Latina and white) Muslims in the US while acknowledging the "false dichotomy" that these categories present, given that immigrant Muslims come from all over the world, including from Black African countries. She asserts that although American Mus-

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lim communities defy easy generalizations because of their diversity, it is critical that all Muslims understand the history of African Americans. Sanyika states plainly:

> I do not naively think that immigrant Muslims came here to involve themselves in the anti-racist struggles of African Americans. I'm sure most immigrants have their own struggles just trying to figure out their new culture or escaping religious or racial persecution in their own countries. However, coming to the United States to enjoy the incredible wealth created by African slavery while turning a blind eye to those very people who suffered to make this country so wealthy is insensitive at best and extremely hurtful to those who share that painful legacy.[113]

Further, Sanyika argues that regardless of whether someone was born in the states or immigrated, they must not only acknowledge the brutality of US history and combat anti-Black racism, but do so as Muslims. She states, "If you recognize anti-Black prejudices in your home, in your workplace, or anywhere within your culture or life please work hard to shed it within yourself and encourage others to do the same, because it is against the very spirit of Islam." This is another example of how WMA khateebahs not only put Islamic teachings in conversation with social justice activist causes but also actually understand Islam as rooted in anti-racism. Sankiya's khutbah demonstrates how WMA actors lean into activism as a basis for their Islamic authority because it is rooted in some of their very ideas of core Islamic teachings.

More specifically, Sanyika implores Muslims to get to know one another better, "as God tells us in the Qur'an," quoting from Qur'an 49:13.[114] Stating that Muslims are not a cultural monolith, she reaffirms that they should learn about each other and "admit to our personal prejudices and work to eliminate them. This is a mandate from our Creator and from our Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him."[115] Like other WMA khateebahs before her, Sanyika understands anti-Black racism and cross-cultural understandings as moral mandates from the Qur'an and the Prophetic example.[116]

Through khutbahs that address themes of social justice and Islamophobia, or anti-Black racism like Sanyika's, the WMA constructs itself as a platform for cultivating social and political values. In the years

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since the 2016 BLM series, some of the sources of dissatisfaction that congregants described then, such as observing that many non-Black congregants lacked adequate knowledge of American history, have been addressed in subsequent khutbahs. As power and authority flow between congregants, organizers, and khateebahs, there is a dialectical relationship among the various members of the WMA who collectively determine what issues and topics will be addressed in the monthly khutbahs. In other words, since the WMA promotes lay Muslim women's authority, at any given time a congregant has the opportunity to suggest a khutbah topic or even serve as a khateebah and speak on a subject that she deems urgent. Within this model of Islamic authority, power shifts and flows among various actors, giving congregants who take issue with specific attitudes or trends recourse to correct and educate their community.

Beyond a khutbah like Sanyika's that directly calls on Muslims to acknowledge US history beyond revisionist narratives that erase the brutal legacy of slavery, other khutbahs educate the WMA community on race and Islamophobia. In the wake of the 2020 murder of Black American George Floyd in Minneapolis that set off protests against police brutality around the world, the WMA hosted a Facebook livestream Q&A session on Zoom that in part addressed how to support the movement for Black lives.[117] By enlisting khateebahs from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, the WMA exposes its congregation to a multiplicity of American Muslim experiences and authorizes all of them. By endowing lay Muslim women with authority and helping them together to cultivate particular religious, social, and political sensibilities, the WMA facilitates the larger ongoing process of creating a multiracial community based on knowledge and respect. This commitment to justice in turn helps the WMA: congregants generally felt that its attempt to engage structural racism through Islamic teachings bolstered its authority and relevance to US Muslim communities, even when it fell short of its stated goals. They also appreciated its interfaith outreach to Jewish and Christian women, a topic to which the next chapter turns.

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